

Recommendations for Building Community Online for Adult E-Learners

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Paper presented to the International Seminar on E-Pedgogy in the Digital Age, India, presented online. Presented May 2021.

Abstract

Adult learners have more options for enrolling in postsecondary education than ever before, and they are able to use their learning style preference in deciding which program best meets their needs. For some of these students, those programs are fully online, and for others, there is minimal use of technology. As technology grows and become more integrated into individual lives, the unique learning styles and preferences of adults need to learn to be incorporated into instructional design. Drawing on a regional sample of US colleges, 545 adult learners in a graduate programs were surveyed about how to effectively build community in their online classes. Results indicated some agreement with these instructional tools. Mature adult learners, however, were found to have stronger agreement with strategies that included work outside of the formal online class. These results suggest perhaps a greater comfort for adults in working in spaces where there is less likelihood of being judged or graded, and that they might value relational work with other students in different ways than younger adults.

1. Introduction

For the past decade, online education opportunities have grown exponentially (Ginder, Kelly-Reid, & Mann, 2019). This growth has encompassed formal degree programs, community education programs, training certificates, and an entire range of informal learning offered through museums, non-profits, and even government agencies. At the central rationale for the creation of these programs is the ability of learners to be removed from the source of instruction. This distance element of incorporated into online learning is the reason that online learning has been relied upon so heavily during the recent COVID pandemic; students can leave campus and still complete their educational programs from remote, more isolated locations.

Despite the title 'online learning,' these programs make use of a wide range of teaching strategies, including synchronous, online live classes, modular constructed self-paced reading units, and even self-directed learning episodes. This range of classes make use of traditional article and book reading, video lectures and other media related to the course content, including games and simulations.

Many online learning programs have found creative and captivating ways to get and hold the attention of the learner, but few have been able to build interpersonal community and connectivity among students. This means that although a student might communicate via e-mail or an a moderated discussion board, they rarely develop the interpersonal community which is a hallmark and value-added component of most traditional college level instruction. This is particularly problematic for adult and non-traditional learners who see education as a primarily functional or pragmatic experience.

During the time of the global pandemic, as higher education institutions struggle to maintain their student populations, many have moved their traditional, face-to-face classes to online platforms (Miller, 2020). The problem for adult learners is that many of these students specifically sought out and enrolled in programs that allowed for direct, personal interaction. For some of these students this enrollment was based on a need to be held accountable, for some it was a natural reflection of their learning preferences, and for some, it was a matter of convenience. The result in the current state of higher education, however, is that adult learners who chose to be in face-to-face learning classes are now placed into online classes where they will struggle unless college faculty can find ways to build community. The purpose for conducting the current study was to identify strategies to build academic learning community among adults in online education.

2. Background of the Study

Adult learners comprise nearly half of all students enrolled in US higher education. These students are enrolled in traditional and non-traditional degree and certificate programs, and they frequently are enrolled on a part-time basis. Many of these learners take advantage of online learning options as they work to balance other responsibilities, such as employment and family obligations.

In addition to balancing life-expectations, many adults also learn differently (Knowles, 1984). This differentiation from adolescent learning is grounded in the idea that adults have a breadth of life experiences to draw from, and that learning occurs in a more ordered fashion (Langner, 1994) with knowledge constructed in a hierarchical manner. Adults learn in a manner that allows them to build upon prior experience and as new ideas are introduced, adults tend to relate that information back to the existing knowledge and experience, resulting in both different interpretations of ideas and a different pace of learning (Eggleston & Chase, 2015).

Adult learners have been among the first to make use of online learning in significant ways, as many of these learners have participated in non-traditional programs that provide, for example, prior learning credit or credit for life experiences. The result for many institutions is that they have created unique programs to respond to adult learners (Ross-Gordon, 2011), for example, providing competency testing for early completion of an academic course.

Research has already demonstrated that adults learn well in online learning environments. For the most part, however, this type of satisfaction with online learning has been the result of self-selection, meaning that these adult learners consciously select online programs and providers to meet their immediate needs. These adult learners decided to enroll in online programs. The recent global health crisis, however, has forced many adults who had chosen other, traditional, face-to-face programs for their learning to be moved into online learning environments.

There are multiple, significant challenges resulting from the change to adult learners from traditional classes to online classes. Some of these challenges might be related to generational concerns about technology use, some concerns might be related to communication skills, and some challenges might be related to how communication occurs and what types of informal feedback are provided to learners (Smith, 2013). In particular, in traditional classrooms, there are a variety of media available for students to demonstrate their learning. For example, students can write papers, they can engage in case study discussions, they can make presentations or present their work through posters, and, they can even document their learning through different artifacts such as pictures. When classes are moved into online formats, however, the natural known ability of communication for (in this case) adult learners then becomes mediated through technology, often making communication less authentic and increasingly structured. This was the case in the Grover and Miller (2012) study that identified higher levels of writing apprehension among adult students in online programs, and that the higher the apprehension level, the lower the academic achievement (as measured by the learner's grade point average).

Of critical importance to the adult learner is the ability to communicate in the classroom to both express interest, find clarity, and seek reassurance from both the instructor and fellow students. This ability to communicate is reflected in the notion of 'community,' the complex yet necessary state of an individual in relation to others. Establishing community has been identified as critical to adult learning (Gouthro, 2010), and this search for connectivity has been identified in mid-life (mature) adults as very important (Ballard & Morris, 2003). The possibility

of lost community, as an instructional component, for adult learners now placed into online classes was the justification for the current study

3. Research Procedures

To address the descriptive purpose for conducting the study, data were collected from three graduate, social sciences master's degree-level programs that enrolled primarily adult learners. These three programs were located in three different research-intensive universities in the Midwestern United States, and all suspended their live, face-to-face classes in March 2020 due to the global health pandemic. Working through each program's academic coordinator, email addresses were obtained from each program and all students were sent a researcher-developed online survey. The estimates from the program coordinators totaled 545 students.

The survey included 17 questions, with the first two requesting information on the age and degree status of the participants. The next 15 items were a listing of online teaching strategies that could be used to build community among learners. Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement that each strategy would be successful in building community in their online class. The survey made use of a Likert-type scale where 1=Strongly Disagree that the strategy would aid in building community progressing to 5=Strongly Agree that the strategy would build community among the adults.

The survey was pilot tested with 15 graduate students who provided written feedback on the validity of the instrument. The pilot test scoring resulted in a Cronbach alpha of .7009, which was deemed acceptable for the current study.

Data collection occurred in the last week of March and first two weeks of April 2020. Three rounds of follow up email reminders were used to attempt to increase participation by the sample.

4. Findings

Of the potential 545 students, a total of 113 completed, usable responses were received for a response rate of 20.7%. A total of $n=38$ of the respondents (33.6% of the respondents) were between the ages of 23-39 and were for the study classified as 'younger adults.' The remaining 75 respondents (66%) of the respondents were over the age of 40. The distinction between age groups was provided on the survey to help differentiate aging differences, particularly looking for differences between perceptions of those closer to being a digital 'native' and those closer to being classified as digital 'immigrants.'

For the younger adults, those closer to traditional aged graduate students, they agreed most strongly with the community building online activities of shared video calls ($\bar{x}=4.56$), dyadic work (working in a two-person team) $\bar{x}=4.01$, and required informal conversations ($\bar{x}=3.88$). They agreed least strongly with blogging ($\bar{x}=3.33$), open forum classes ($\bar{x}=3.33$), and group paper writing ($\bar{x}=3.27$; see Table 1).

For 'mature' adults (those over age 40) who responded to the survey, they agreed most strongly with the community building strategies of required informal conversations ($\bar{x}=4.57$), dyadic work ($\bar{x}=4.41$), and required out-of-class communication ($\bar{x}=4.25$). They agreed least with voluntary ($\bar{x}=3.39$) and required ($\bar{x}=3.37$) blogging and group co-teaching ($\bar{x}=3.30$).

Following the computation of mean scores, a one-way Analysis of Variance was conducted with a resulting $p < .05$ (.00325) indicating a significant difference between the means. A subsequent Tukey-post hoc pairwise test of differences was conducted and identified differences between five sets of responses. Mature adult learners agreed significantly more strongly with the community building strategies of off-line group work-teams, dyadic work, required informal conversation, and required out-of-class communications. Conversely, the younger adults significantly agreed more with the instructional strategy of shared video calls.

5. Discussion

For nearly 75 years, research has shown that adults learn differently than others, that they make use of their personal and professional lives in relating new information, attempting to give it meaning and function in their lives. This has resulted in a wide variety of structured and self-directed learning practices, and it has given adults important tools that they need to be successful in the classroom. Many adults have fully embraced the heightened world of technology in the 21st century, yet some still struggle in understanding the pervasiveness of technology and how it can change everyday life.

Regardless of the attitudes toward technology, adult learners have been able to identify formal degree programs that correspond to their needs and learning styles. For most students, there is a self-selection of learning preferences, with some students enrolling in entirely online programs while others enroll in very traditional, face-to-face courses that might minimally use technology. With the outbreak of the global pandemic, most students have not been able to escape a confrontation with technology mediated learning, and while this transition to online coursework has been broadly accepted for traditional aged students, it does present unique challenges for adult learners.

The current study was designed to explore differentiations of acceptance of online learning, specifically how adult learners perceived an effective strategy for building community among adult, online learners. Drawing on a sample of graduate students at three Midwestern US universities, data indicated moderate agreement that the strategies identified would be effective in building community, although mature adult learners, those over the age of 40, did agree more strongly with 4 of 15 strategies when compared to perceptions of younger adults. These more mature adult learners seemed to be placing greater emphasis on out-of-class experiences, such as required conversations or communications outside of the boundaries of what might be happening in the learning management system.

These findings begin an important conversation for college faculty and anyone teaching adult learners particularly focused on how to incorporate principles of adult learning into highly

managed adult learning environments. Online learning is successful because all elements of the course are constructed and managed carefully with little room for interpretation of learning outcomes or grading rubrics. In turn, this means that instructional designers must consider adult learning as courses are planned and developed.

As for adult learners who are displaced during this time of pandemic, institutional leaders should make every effort to accommodate their learning needs and use their institution wide teaching centers to assist faculty in designing programs, activities, and assignments that can promote deep learning.

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Table 1.

Most Effective Community Building for Adult Learners Online by Age Range

N=113

	Younger Adults n=38	Mature Adults n=75
Discussion board posts	3.68	3.42
Off-line group work – teams	3.55	4.41*
Dyadic work	4.01	4.56*
Shared video calls	4.56	4.10*
“Open” online office hours	3.66	3.70
Open forum classes	3.29	3.45
Blogging	3.33	3.39
Blogging response-voluntary	3.40	3.37
Blogging response-required	3.36	3.30
Group co-teaching	3.49	3.57
Group research project	3.69	3.66
Group paper writing/response	3.27	3.50
Collaborative service learning	3.58	3.88
Required informal conversations	3.88	4.57*
Required out-of-class communications	3.62	4.25*

 $f=9.59$; $p<.05$